# WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES THE CROSS MAKE TO LIFE?

# David Atkinson

When the New Testament refers to the difference the cross makes to our life and our living, the cross is (almost always, I think) bracketed with the resurrection. I believe we need to think of the way the cross impinges on life as part of the way our human stories engage with, or are caught up into, the whole of the broader story of Jesus’ birth, life, suffering, death, burial, resurrection, ascension and parousia (see Calvin, *Institutes* II.16.19). What difference does the story of Jesus, especially his death and resurrection, make to our human stories -- to my human story?

1 JUDGMENT AND DEATH AS PART OF OUR STORY

When the New Testament indicates that the new humanity is seen in Jesus, it presents this as the fulfilment of God’s promise of blessing to Abraham, and therefore as God’s ultimate reply to the curses and judgments of Genesis 1--11. In Christ, there is a renewed creation (cf. 2 Cor 5.17). The kingdom of God is ‘creation healed’. The Genesis story displays the ambiguity of this world. Some strands proclaim ‘this is good’. Others speak of God’s curses and judgments in response to the world’s disorders. Particularly in Genesis 3, these disorders are depicted in terms of the desire for self-advancement and a lack of trust in God’s word, instead of the desire for growth in the knowledge of God on the basis of obedience. The result, in the stories of Adam, Cain, Lamech, Babel, is a context of mistrust in place of trust; of shame in place of openness in relationships; of guilt in place of responsibility; of conflict in place of communion. All relationships, between people and God, people and each other, people and their environment, people within themselves, become estranged. Complementarity of the sexes becomes subordination; work become toil; mutuality and fellowship become banishment and alienation (cf. Atkinson 1990).

This is the anatomy of disorder, which can most broadly be described as the ‘rule of death’. Instead of growth, delight, creativity, freedom, and fellowship, human life is marked also by the anxiety of mistrust, the frustration of shame, the bondage of guilt, the loneliness and bitterness of conflict.

It is fascinating how Erik Erikson’s psychosocial approach to human development picks up many of these themes. In his chapter on ‘Eight ages of man’ (1977) he suggests that the processes of human development usually include critical phases in which the growing person has to deal with various tensions in their personal and interpersonal lives. The most basic question for the baby is whether the external world is ultimately trustworthy or not. As the baby grows, will its life be marked by autonomy or shame, by initiative or guilt, by industry or inferiority? Will the adolescent’s life be noted for a sense of identity or one of confusion -- will a person be able to offer intimacy in relationships, or be isolated in loneliness? Will adult life be one of creativity and integrity, or of stagnation and despair?

Whereas Erikson is seeking to describe a process of psychosocial maturation, the struggle with ambiguity at each point involves mistrust, shame, guilt, inferiority, confusion, isolation, stagnation and despair. Here is a developmental psychologist describing the dark side of our nature, the ‘rule of death.’

Ernest Becker (1973) sees the rule of death in other ways, notably in our persistent human denial of it. He argues that our ‘innate and all-encompassing fear of death’ drives us to ‘attempt to transcend death’ through various cultural symbols and practices. ‘A “no!” to death is profoundly rooted in the very being of man’ (Berger 1971, 81). That No! is surely also the motivation for Dylan Thomas’s angry poem in the face of the death of his father:

Do not go gentle into that good night...

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

The sense of disorder is also powerfully explored in *King* *Lear* (I.2):

These late eclipses of the sun and moon portend no good to us: though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourg’d by the sequent effects: love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide: in cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond crack’d ‘twixt son and father.... We have seen the best of our time: machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders, follow us disquietly to our graves.

Psychologist, sociologist, and poet are all profoundly disturbed by the negative, disordered, destructive dimensions of the ‘rule of death’ in life, and yet hold out a hope that life must be more than this.

It is at this point that Leon Morris’s book *The* *Cross* *of* *Jesus* rings true. He argues that the atonement is vaster and deeper than many of the traditional theories suggest, and that some of the aspects of the cross to which the New Testament points have not received the attention they deserve. The cross is God’s response to the human experience of futility, ignorance, loneliness, sickness, selfishness and death. This provides a language of atonement for today. Whereas some patristic authors understood the cross mostly in terms of slavery and ransom, whereas Anselm opens us to the feudal categories in which sin is understood as dishonour, and Calvin uses his legal mind to focus mostly on guilt and acquittal, and whereas Aulen’s *Christus* *Victor* could catch the headlines in 1930s Europe with its return to the military categories of conquest, today we need to hear more about sin in the terms we drew from the Genesis prologue. Mistrust, alienation, shame, guilt, conflict, and disorder are some of the primary effects of sin depicted in Genesis 1--11. ‘Alienation’, in particular, speaks of a deep force which seems to pull us all away from our centre in God. This is part, I think, of what Simone Weil (1952) means by ‘gravity’ (and cf. Dillistone 1968; Fiddes 1989).

2 JESUS BECOMES SUBJECT TO THE RULE OF DEATH, AND OVERPOWERS IT

One of the key features of Jesus’ life is his identification with the poor, the outcast, those who are under threat. His application to himself of the Isaianic prophecy concerning good news for the poor, release for the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and the setting at liberty of those who are oppressed (Luke 4), is paralleled by his being known to be on the side of outcasts and sinners, and eating with them (Luke 15.2). The healing ministry of Jesus, particularly when seen in the light of the Old Testament laws concerning uncleanness, is also an expression of his bringing life into the rule of death. Wenham (1982, 115-6) understands the uncleanness laws in terms of a fundamental antithesis between life and death. Certain impure conditions, such as diseases like leprosy, certain bodily discharges, and touching a dead body, are polluting because they symbolize the impurity of the whole people of God. Jesus, by touching the leper, by healing the woman with a discharge of blood, by holding the hand of the dead, is declaring that the antithesis of life and death is bridged. God is a God of life, normality and health. Jesus’ healings demonstrate God’s infusion of life into the rule of death.

This process is seen at its fullest in Jesus’ own taking on himself the rule of death, and yet being raised to life again. In the Gospel narrative of the passion, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus, we see a man betrayed -- his whole environment was untrustworthy. Even his closest friends forsook him and fled. We see a man naked and exposed to mockery and shame. We see a man dying alone. We see the agony of uncertainty in the Garden, and the agony of separation from the fellowship of his Father in the cry of dereliction: ‘My God, why have you forsaken me?’ Such a death is the death of one who is cursed by God (Gal 3.13; Deut 21.23). Paul sums up the whole experience for us in the remarkable phrase ‘God made him to be sin, who knew no sin’(2 Cor 5.21).

Jesus experienced in his passion, trial, suffering and crucifixion all the effects of the rule of death in human life: mistrust, alienation and frustration, shame, guilt, conflict, confusion, loneliness, and despair.

His death is the summation of the rule of death. ‘A sight most pitiful in the meanest wretch, past speaking of in a king!’ (*King* *Lear* IV.6).

And then in his resurrection we see what we might call the death of the rule of death. Jesus ‘let himself be swallowed by death, as it were, not to be engulfed in its abyss, but rather to engulf it’ (Calvin, *Institutes* II.16.7).

Jesus’ death and resurrection is the means by which the rule of death in this world is broken. He takes on death, dies its death, and yet is raised to new life. He partook of our nature ‘that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage’ (Heb 2.14). God’s deliverance is made possible through the combined power of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Without the resurrection, any talk of the power of Jesus’ death is incomplete. The purpose of the Lord’s dying, and of all dying in him was ‘that He might turn again to incorruption men who had turned back to corruption, and make them alive through death by the appropriation of His body and by the grace of His resurrection’ (Athanasius, *The* *Incarnation* 8).

Since only weakness appears in the cross, death, and burial of Christ, faith must leap over all these things to attain its full strength. We have in his death the complete fulfillment of salvation, for through it we are reconciled to God, his righteous judgment is satisfied, the curse is removed, and the penalty paid in full. Nevertheless we are said to ‘have been born anew to a living hope’ not through his death but ‘through his resurrection’ [1 Peter 1:3p.].... ‘He was put to death for our sins, and raised for our justification’[Rom. 4:25].... Sin was taken away by his death; righteousness was revived and restored by his resurrection. (Calvin, *Institutes* II.16.13)

The ambiguity, suffering and struggle of which psychologists and poets speak can also be understood as the labour pains of God -- to bring forth a new people, restoration, new life, new hope (cf. Rom 8.22-23). Francis Young links this to teaching about hope in the New Testament, with its two aspects.

The first is its acceptance that the present state of the world is far from satisfactory. The second is confidence that nevertheless it is all under God, and God’s purposes will be worked out. Atonement is to do with making that hope credible. (1982, 54)

The Bible emphasizes that the motivation behind the death of Jesus is the self-giving love of God, the God of life, whose infusion of life into the rule of death opens up the possibility that true human life can yet be lived. It is from the creative heart of the Father that his saving love extends to his disordered and perishing world (John 3.16). Within the life of the love of God, the obedience of Jesus to his Father’s will is the means by which the Father’s saving love comes into the world. The death and resurrection of Jesus are to do with God, in love, taking responsibility on his own shoulders for the disorders of the world, integrating everything back into line with his creative purposes, sharing in the sufferings of his suffering world and yet not being crushed by them. A human being has ‘engulfed’ the power of the rule of death and so brought life and immortality to light once again (2 Tim 1.10). In our disordered and alienated world one of us has broken through the power of this world’s disorders, and -- like God in the opening of the creation saga -- has brought order again where there was chaos.

It is through the work of the Holy Spirit, uniting us to the life and death of Jesus Christ, that the Father’s love seen in Jesus is shed abroad in our hearts, bringing life where death rules. It is by reference to the work of the Holy Spirit within the love of the Holy Trinity, that we can approach the question: what difference does the story of Jesus makes to my human story? What difference does the cross make to life?

3 WE ARE UNITED WITH CHRIST IN HIS DEATH AND IN HIS RESURRECTION

In the incarnation of Jesus the Son of God assumes our out-of-line humanity under the judgment of God. God and humanity are inextricably and indivisibly united in the person of Jesus Christ. It is as representative and authentic true human being that Jesus dies and is raised to life again. If we are to be affected by the life and death and resurrection of Christ, we must be united with him, incorporated into him, actually share his life. And this is what the New Testament means by the power of the Holy Spirit incorporating us as living members into Christ’s body, the church.

The objective union which we have with Christ through his incarnational assumption of our humanity into himself is subjectively actualised in us through his indwelling spirit, we in Christ and Christ in us thus complementing and interpenetrating each other. In other words, there takes place a relation of mutual indwelling between Christ and the church which derives from and is grounded in the mutual indwelling of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in the Holy Trinity. (Torrance 1983, 77)

The cross and resurrection of Christ do not affect us merely by some moral influence, offering a powerful example which we then imitate (as some have interpreted Abelard, and Rashdall). The cross and resurrection do not affect us at all through some legal fiction of imputed guilt and imputed righteousness (as some have interpreted the penal substitution theory). They affect us because we are really and actually united with the Christ who died and was raised, in our very beings. As he engulfs the power of the rule of death and is raised to life again, we, united with him, are also set free and made new creatures in him (2 Cor 5.17), by the gift of the Spirit.

By His own blood then the Lord redeemed us, and gave His life for our life, His flesh for our flesh; and He poured out the Spirit of the Father to bring about the union and communion of God and man, bringing down God to men through the Spirit while raising man to God through His incarnation and His advent, surely and truly giving us incorruption through the communion which we have with God. (Ireneaus, *Against* *the* *Heresies* V.1.2)

‘If we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his’ (Rom 6.5). As we, as individual believers, are incorporated into the body of Christ when we receive grace and are baptized, we are incorporated into the Christ whose death overcame the rule of death and whose resurrection is in truth ‘the power at work within us’ (Eph 3.20; cf. 1.19, 20).

For those baptized into Christ, the story of Jesus now includes our own. Our life stories are changed by being incorporated into his. This change is both gift and task (see Rom 6). There is a change in our status: ‘We know that our old self was crucified with him.... If we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him’. There is also a summons to live a new life: ‘You also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.... No longer present your members to sin ... but present yourselves to God’.

4 LIFE IN THE BODY OF CHRIST

What does that mean in the actual experience of living? The traditional categories of atonement theology are sin and forgiveness. I have tried to broaden the concept of sin to include not only the moral guilt of ungodly behaviour, which separates us from fellowship with God, but the wider themes of mistrust, shame, guilt, and conflict. By mistrust, I mean anxiety and frustration in the face of an uncertain world, in which powers greater than our own threaten us. By shame, I mean our own sense of personal failure, and the inability to hold up our heads with confidence and gratitude that we are who we are. By guilt, I mean the state in which we put ourselves through violation of God’s moral character. By conflict, I mean the confusion, alienation, and isolation in our relationships with one another and with our environment.

Forgiveness, likewise, can have a narrower or a broader focus. It is essentially a relational word. Forgiveness is appropriate in a situation where things are wrong. It does not pretend that there is no wrong. It does not offer peace at any price. Forgiveness is a dynamic process of change. It breaks down the idealizations that pretend that the world is all angel or all devil. It recognizes ambiguity: that there is real evil, wrong, and injustice, but that there is also hope of change. Forgiveness attempts to respond to wrong in a way that is open to new possibilities, seeking to reshape the future in the light of what is wrong, in the most creative way possible. It moves beyond the determinisms of fatalistic anxiety, despair of change, the law of retaliation, and the bitterness of resentful conflict. Forgiveness is costly, and hard work, but essentially filled with hope -- the offer of re-creation.

In other words, forgiveness is the process by which the life of resurrection, through the power of the Holy Spirit, engulfs, transforms, and replaces in us the rule of sin and death. Forgiveness and the presentation of ourselves to God is a process, a journey, something dynamic and changing, not static and fixed, a pilgrimage -- even an adventure. Forgiveness is a relationship-word, and relationships happen over time. As the Skin Horse said to the Velveteen Rabbit, ‘It doesn’t happen all at once.... You *become*. It takes a long time.’

Let us see what forgiveness means in response to four of the features of what we earlier called ‘the rule of death’, drawing on Pruyser (1991) and Oates (1973).

(i) MISTRUST. What difference does the cross and resurrection of Jesus make to someone who is given up to anxiety? For some people, anxiety is terrifying. The world is filled with terrifying powers over which I have no control. I may be stuck in what I once heard called a ‘required relationship’-- a pattern of life and attitude from which I dare not move, because if I were to move there would be some terrible catastrophe, a hole would open in the universe and I would fall down it. Some of us hold onto depression, because what underlies the depression is too awful to face. For others, the feelings may not be so debilitating, but are none the less their basic attitude to the world. The world is not safe.

So I build idols to worship, to take my mind off life’s uncertainties. Humankind, as Eliot said, cannot bear very much reality. I put my faith in horoscopes, tarot cards, the stars, materialism, noise, other people who will come and rescue me; perhaps parents deify their children. Oates quotes Tillich: ‘Idolatry is the elevation of a preliminary concern to ultimacy.’ When our devotion is given to something partial, conditioned, finite, we are resting our faith on something very fragile, and transient. ‘Gordon Allport identified one characteristic of the mature religious sentiment as being comprehensiveness. To fix one’s life commitment on a restricted, finite, and temporary object of devotion is to have a noncomprehensive sentiment in one’s faith’ (Oates 1973, 204). But it is sometimes easier, at least temporarily, to believe in the images which press upon me from the culture around, unreal as they often are, and then despair that I cannot live up to these unreal expectations. I am living in untruth, not in faith, trust, and obedience.

By contrast, forgiveness opens up the possibilities of hope again. In his cross and resurrection Jesus Christ has gone the way of anxiety and despair before me. He is the pioneer who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame. He has gone the way of uncertainty, ahead of me, and broken the powers that so frighten me. The ineffectiveness of these other gods is now shown up.

Repentance of the sin of idolatry means to change one’s god from a constricted, narrowed and dying god to a universal, comprehensive and eternal God. This calls for a change of mind, a transformation of loyalty, and a release of one’s clutch on family, nation, denomination, race, sex, school, teacher, or ideological bias. (Oates 1973, 205)

And if God did not spare his own son, will he not with him also freely give us all things? Nothing in the whole of creation can now separate me from his love (Rom 8). My hope now lies in the fact that he promises to hold on to me in my uncertainties. Through the valley of every shadow he is with me. I can therefore, really and truly, cast my care onto him, for by his death and resurrection he has brought me, really and truly, into the place where I know that he cares for me, and that all things will one day be brought to their fulfilment in him (Eph 1.7-10).

If sin is about mistrust, idolatry, and lack of faith, forgiveness through the death and resurrection of Christ is about God’s providence, the ‘enlargement of life’ (Oates), the journey of pilgrimage, living in hope. The evil powers have been conquered (Aulen). ‘We know that the Son of God has come.... Little children, keep yourselves from idols’ (1 John 5.20-21).

(ii) SHAME. What difference does the cross and resurrection of Jesus make to someone who is shriveled through shame? Shame only comes into existence in a world of division (cf. Bonhoeffer 1959, 78-81). This began with the division between man and woman. In the Garden they were naked and not ashamed, but the division between them means that neither can now lift up their heads with confidence before the other. Shame also expresses the division within myself -- between my hopes, desires, aspirations, and my failure, falling short, and disappointment. Shame makes it hard for me to sing ‘Thank you, Father, for making me me’. Through my own wrongdoing as well as through my failure to achieve, I believe myself to be of little worth. I do not like myself. And I am wading, head turned down, in a murky pool of stagnant water -- the water of my disappointed hopes, lost opportunities, and inability to reach the standards I and others had set. If my personal worth depends on my achievements, I am worth little.

Forgiveness opens up to me the resources of grace. Forgiveness is rooted in the gift of God’s grace to us in Christ. Through his death and resurrection, God loves us. We are given the gift of belonging to Christ, of knowing that he has held his head in shame, crowned with thorns, but now holds it high, crowned with glory. If we are incorporated into Christ in the whole story of his suffering and humiliation, as well as the power of his new life, our lives are set in a new place. The old equation ‘worth equals works’ can now be replaced by ‘worth is a gracious gift’. This, I think, is the existential meaning of justification by grace through faith. Jesus Christ is the Justified One, and I am justified because incorporated into him.

When one comes to terms with, confesses, and rethinks his behaviour and makes a decision to change, a reward of forgiveness resides in the decision: He has now thrown off the sense of weakness and begun to feel real strength. The result of feeling genuinely forgiven is freedom from impotence and helplessness. The resolve itself is a source of strength’ (Oates 1973, 208).

And so forgiveness breaks down idealizations. I no longer have to think of myself in the either/or terms of either wonderful and achieving, or failing and worthless. If I forgive myself, I realize that this side of heaven I will always to some extent get it wrong, I will fail, I will hurt people and they will hurt me. But I can also realize that my identity is not now defined by such things; my identity is centred -- indeed given -- elsewhere. I am now united with one who has identified with this world’s failures and was not crushed by them, one who therefore is ‘not untouched with the feeling of our infirmities’ (AV), who can ‘sympathize with our weaknesses’(NRSV) (Heb 4.15), and who promises ‘grace to help in time of need.’

If sin is about shame, forgiveness (especially of myself) is about the development of a realistic self-concept. It is about knowing myself as united with the crucified and risen Lord, with my identity now given, not through my own divisions and failure, but in grace.

Joanna and Alister McGrath (1992) have developed an account of self-esteem which draws on the attachment theory of John Bowlby in *Attachment* *and* *Loss*, linking his ideas concerning the implications of parental attachment and separation to the theological concept of being ‘bonded to Christ’. A Christian, once separated by God through sin, can find their true self-worth and acceptance grounded in an attachment to God through Christ. As Abelard says, the cross manifests God’s accepting love. Now I must ‘put on love’.

‘So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above.... For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God.... Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly.... Clothe yourselves with love’ (Col 3).

(iii) GUILT. Implicit in the notion of sin is my moral accountability before God, as a person capable of choice. Whatever may be true of the limits within which my freedom is exercised, genetic or environmental, I still have the freedom to choose how much to collude with, confront, accept or deny the attitudes and patterns of behaviour with which I have grown up. I can understand my moral accountability in terms of a development from a prudential morality (in which I do certain things to avoid punishment or pain), through an authoritarian morality (in which I do certain things in response to external authority), to a personal morality (in which I take responsibility -- within appropriate limits -- for my choices and behaviour) (adapted from Kohlberg 1976).

To acknowledge my sin includes acknowledging that some at least of my choices and behaviour-patterns are out of line with the purposes and character of God. Sin includes transgression, and its result is guilt. Guilt has both an objective dimension as the state of a moral person who has violated or transgressed a moral law, and a subjective dimension, in which guilt is ‘a feeling of having done something wrong, and cannot be analysed away into anything else’(McKeating 1970, 16). This is that aspect of my personality commonly referred to as my conscience. (There is also what Buber calls ‘civic guilt’, the sort of legal guilt which arises through the infringement of certain social conventions -- which may or may not include objective moral guilt; this does not concern us here.) I may be objectively guilty and not feel guilty (because my conscience has been worn down); I may subjectively feel guilty when I am not objectively guilty (because my conscience is over-scrupulous).

If I am to speak of sin in relation to guilt, I am referring primarily to the objective moral state of having violated God’s purposes, law and character. It is a refusal, as Barth says, to let God be God. This may or may not include some subjective feelings associated with this. But true moral guilt is a trap, a bondage, from which I need to be set free. Behind wrong behaviour usually also lies a false belief. Behaviours are the expression of faith, which is why Paul says ‘Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin’ (Rom 14.23). The cognitive therapists, who work with the destructiveness of irrational beliefs and their consequent behavioural responses, remind us of the trap of guilt which follows wrong faith and wrong doing.

By contrast, forgiveness liberates me from condemnation, and enables me to live in freedom. It can speak of the truth which sets free. How does this happen?

The Object Relations approach of Melanie Klein (e.g., 1960) is the nearest I think psychoanalytic theory gets to providing a model of the inner changes which forgiveness brings. Klein illustrates the emotions of our adult world by reference to what she calls their ‘roots in infancy.’ In Klein’s understanding, the maturing process in the child goes through various stages.

For a child who has related to mother in contradictory ways (the nourishing mother whom I love; the depriving mother who leaves me to cry, whom I hate), the development to seeing the mother as a whole person -- sometimes nourishing, sometimes depriving -- includes a realization of true guilt, that I have screamed at the one who is my provider and who loves me. There is a deep sense that wrong must be punished and a penalty paid. How is the child to move from incapacitating guilt to the capacity to give and receive love creatively towards mother and others?

Klein says this comes through making reparation. Motherhood needs to provide the facilitating context in which emotional reparation can be made, and the demands of moral order satisfied. Then life can become creative.

Whatever we think of this as a model of child development (and the inner workings of a baby’s mind are, of course, untestable), it provides a model for understanding the changes which forgiveness can bring in our adult world. For guilt to be handled, there must be reparation. The demands of right and wrong must be satisfied. Only then can life go on creatively.

In connection with Jesus’ cross and resurrection, those strands of the New Testament which speak of the cross in terms of God’s curse, of an expression of divine wrath, and of the punishment for sin, are speaking of a divinely provided means by which reparation can be made. Anselm is right that God’s honour needs to be satisfied, even if his model of satisfaction is inappropriate in a post-feudal world. Anselm is right that sin must be taken seriously enough. He is also right that only God can provide the means for making reparation. We must beware here of dividing up the Holy Trinity, as though the Son was appeasing the Father. One way of expressing this is to say that the interpersonal self-giving love within the Persons of the Godhead flows out into the suffering and guilty world of persons who are trapped in their guilt. In costly grace it unites with them in their guilt, and then in them and on their behalf makes the reparation needed to satisfy the honour of the God at whom we have screamed, despite his being our provider and the one who loves us. In Christ, God makes the costly reparation; in Christ, we are liberated to live creatively again.

This is close to the language of Romans, which pictures the consequences of sin in terms of four barriers between us and God: wrath, the condemnation of law, the power of sin, and the rule of death. Paul’s gospel is that through divinely provided and costly grace we are free from wrath (5.9), free from sin (6.7), free from condemnation (8.1), and free from the law of sin and death (8.2). It is close, also, to the language of Galatians, which urges us to live *as* freed people.

(iv) CONFLICT. Part of the meaning of sin is conflict: this may be alienation between people and God or people and each other. It may be the destructive jealousy of Cain towards Abel, or the deep-seated vengeance of Lamech. It may be the disintegration of society as a whole through its abandonment of a centre in God (as at Babel). It may show itself in the way we take our stand on the law of retaliation: you owe, so you must pay -- a law which Jesus repudiates in the parable of the unjust steward. It is perhaps most evident in the third of what Stephen Neill (1959, 190-213) calls the ‘three great enemies of the human race: fear, frustration and resentment.’ Resentment is a bitterness which cripples, decays, destroys.

Many other aspects of sin are included in this destructive kaleidoscope of conflict. As Oates puts it (1973, 211):

Sin as alienation from God and man is the composite and end result meaning of sin. Idolatry alienates one from God and those persons and/or things that are put in God’s place. Shrinking back from participating with God and man in the demands of growth in personal and corporate life alienates and estranges a person. Destructive habits preoccupy and hinder one’s relationships to self, others and God. Dividing walls of hostility estrange the self-elevated and ambition-ridden person. The foolish person seems to be asking to be cast out, estranged and isolated.

The result is enmity not only between us and God, but between people, cultures, and races, and between ourselves and our environment. We stand on our rights, we demand our dues, we insist on fairness, and we trample on one another to get it.

Forgiveness, by contrast, is a refusal to be trapped by the law of retaliation. Forgiveness is a willingness to move beyond the requirements of mere fairness into the justice which reflects the redemptive justice of God. Forgiveness does not demand an eye or a tooth, but is willing -- in costly sacrifice and without minimizing wrong -- to seek to make good the wrong as far as possible, and to move from stultifying bitterness and resentment into the fresh air of grace.

In the cross and resurrection God does not demand his dues from us. In costly self-giving he vindicates his justice and righteousness from within his own heart. But he moves beyond requirement into gift, beyond death into life. Forgiveness is about life continuing despite the rule of death.

There is a personal, social and political dimension to forgiveness in this sense.

*Personal* forgiveness may be seen in conflict resolution between marriage partners, in the recognition of and repentance from blameshifting, domination, and manipulation of one person by another, in the healing of memories in a person who has been hurt or abused, and in the letting go of a justified sense of bitterness in one who has been unjustly treated by another, all this in imitation of Christ (see 1 Peter 2.21-23).

*Social* forgiveness would provide a creative contrast to the ingrained habits of our culture which seem to insist and require that people’s sins accumulate against them. A politician who falls into sin may come to repentance, may start a new life, and may give himself to the service of others. Before God his conscience may now be clean, and the past be put behind him.

Not so with the tabloids who keep his story alive, the film-makers who set the story in celluloid, those who will always associate his name with his faults, and will not let him be free.

Can there be a *politics* of forgiveness? Haddon Wilmer (1979) has sought to outline what such a political stance might involve (cf. Hinchliff 1982; Atkinson 1985). His thesis is that the biblical concept of justice points towards certain political responses to evil in the world which are very close to what in personal terms we would call forgiveness. It refuses to be trapped in a fatalistic determinism. It refuses peace at any price and seeks to vindicate justice in the face of wrong. It seeks to approach the wrongdoer not in terms of bare retaliation and retributive justice alone, but in a way that is creative of new possibilities. Forgiveness underlines the reality of human frailty and sin, and the limited capacity of human resources to deal with them, but for the sake of the common good it seeks to explore ways of handling wrong and guilt creatively and not destructively. Forgiveness involves a gracious initiative from the party who is wronged. Without forgiveness in the political arena, the options open seem to be either to reject the notion that politics is about conciliation and making the best of faulty people, limited resources, and a distorting heritage, or to abandon all quest for justice in human affairs and to acquiesce in injustice. Wilmer’s thesis has relevance to the making of political systems and the creating of political structures. Can a state’s response to evil be both just and redemptive?

The most poignant biblical example of the difficulties and possibilities of conflict resolution at personal, social and political level is the relationship in the early church between Jew and Gentile. That there was discord is evident from Galatians and from Acts. Attitudes of mutual condemnation in Gentile and Jew are clear in the early chapters of Romans. But Ephesians also speaks of those who were far off being brought near in the blood of Christ. ‘For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one, and has broken down the dividing wall, that is the hostility ... [that he] might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility.... Through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father’ (Eph 2.14-18). In other words, through the death of Christ and the gift of the Spirit of the risen Christ, there is now one living body of Christ in this world. Through our actual unity together in Christ, the walls of hostility are breached. Indeed, because Christ has died, we, in him, have died to the law (Gal 2) -- the understanding and application of which has acted as a barrier between Jew and Gentile. Therefore, whether I like it or not I am one with my neighbour. All of us are brothers and sisters ‘for whom Christ died’ (Rom 15).

5 CONCLUSION

In summary: forgiveness is part of the love which casts out fear and part of the truth which sets free. Forgiveness extends beyond our ‘sins’ in the narrow sense of our wrong actions, to ‘all other benefits of his passion’(BCP, Holy Communion), within which I would want to include all that makes for healing, wholeness, *shalom*. Forgiveness is the secret of the atonement, namely that there can be life through death.

When thou dost ask me blessing, I’ll kneel down and ask of thee forgiveness: so we’ll live, and pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh at gilded butterflies. (*King* *Lear* V.3)

Forgiveness is the *relational* part of the mystery of God’s will which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him (Eph 1.9-10). Forgiveness is the response of the gospel to people under the rule of death, given up to mistrust, shame, guilt, and conflict. It is to them a gift of grace, an infusion of life into the rule of death. It is also a task: thereafter within the body of Christ they are to put to death the old nature and put on the new. This is a journey, a process of change, as our stories are caught up into the ongoing story of Christ in the purposes of God for his world. Beginning with Abraham, and through the story of Israel, focusing all God’s judgment and mercy in Jesus Christ, especially his death and resurrection, catching us all up into him in the power of his Spirit, God is creating an authentically new humanity, the Israel of God, of which we are beginning to be part.

Simone Weil (1952, 84) describes the grace which is God’s response to the gravity of sin, in terms of ‘the cross as a balance, as a lever. A going down, the condition of a rising up. Heaven coming down to earth raises earth to heaven.’ The end of the story is the restoration of a renewed Israel, a renewed people of God, who are the true humanity of God’s creative purposes, the nations gathered round the throne of heaven in trust, openness, freedom, and love. And the centre of their worship is a Lamb.

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